

WASHINGTON TIMES
7 November 1986

Initial down payment

CORD MEYER

As the Reagan administration this week sends the "contra" guerrillas on Nicaragua's border the first American shipment of weapons and supplies authorized by Congress after a two-year delay, State and Pentagon officials caution against unrealistic expectations that this aid can have an immediate and dramatic impact on the Nicaraguan conflict.

In fact, top U.S. intelligence officers warn that this first \$100 million is an initial down payment on a program that may require annual funding at that level for as long as five years.

A steady consistency of American purpose and a firm commitment to the "contras" over the long haul are seen to be required if the Sandinistas, with Soviet and Cuban help, are to be prevented from consolidating and expanding a Communist base in the heart of Central America.

There is no tendency in the Reagan administration nor in the democratic "contra" leadership represented by the United Nicaraguan Opposition (UNO) to underestimate the difficulty of dislodging a Sandinista regime that has completed the imposition of a Communist Party dictatorship. Only in Hungary, for a few brief heroic days in 1956, has an internal revolt succeeded in overthrowing a Marxist government after it has established control of the bureaucracy, the secret police, and the army.

Faced with the formidable task of removing a system that has developed the technique of regime preservation to a high art, Reagan officials and the able new representative of UNO in Washington, Ernesto Palazio, find themselves in agreement on the basic priorities.

On the military front, both Pentagon officials and "contra" leaders agree that the new weapons and communication gear must be used to expand the guerrilla base throughout the countryside, while avoiding the direct confrontations involved in trying to seize and hold territory. With gradual confinement of Sandinista units to isolated garrison towns, steady attrition of the Sandinista army through defections can lead to a breakdown of trust between the Soviet and Cuban advisers and an increasingly unreliable Nicaraguan army.

This undermining of the Sandinista military will take time, but Pentagon officials are convinced it can be done with the right mix of weapons, training, and tactics, provided the flow of American support to the guerrillas remains constant.

On the informational front, Mr. Palazio indicates that the UNO leadership has learned the danger of concentrating too exclusively on military matters.

Now that the Sandinista regime has suppressed *La Prensa*, the Catholic radio, and all independent sources of news and opinion, UNO has developed plans for medium-wave radio broadcasting from neighboring countries. The first test programs have proved excellent, and the Nicaraguan people will soon have easy access to objective news and to the views of their exiled democratic leadership.

On the political front, the UNO leaders now recognize that the war can be lost in Washington

cloakrooms even while it is being won on the battlefield. A bright 44-year-old lawyer with a good record of opposition to the Anastasio Somoza dictatorship, Mr. Palazio is determined to improve the "contra" image and to build in the Congress the broad bipartisan support that can outlast the Reagan presidency.

On human rights, the UNO leaders are trying to do everything possible through training and indoctrination to ensure scrupulous adherence to the standards laid down by the International Red Cross. Moreover, UNO has accepted the establishment of an independent human rights commission in Costa Rica to oversee and improve its performance.

Finally, there are limits to what even the most competent and unified "contra" leadership can do to win over the active understanding and support of the major democracies in Latin America and Western Europe. Yet without this support the fragile bipartisan consensus behind the "contras" in the United States will fall apart.

With the indispensable help of the Mexican government, the Daniel Ortega regime in Managua has astutely obscured its own police-state structure and posed as the innocent victim of Yankee imperialism.

Here a sustained diplomatic offensive by the State Department is essential to win over key players like Venezuela and Colombia in Latin America and France and Spain in Europe. There is no lack of evidence and there now seems to be a new willingness in the State Department to make the necessary effort.

The Democratic victory in the vote for the Senate this week will not make Reagan administration support of the "contras" any easier, but it does not endanger the \$100 million already committed. By the time of next year's vote on "contra" aid, a growing number of Democrats in the Congress may have decided they do not want to take on the responsibility of losing Nicaragua to the Communists in a presidential election year.